

Town of Toms River
New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trail
Intersection of Garden State Parkway and
State Route 37
Toms River
Ocean County
New Jersey

HABS No. NJ-1016

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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

TOWN OF TOMS RIVER

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Location: New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trail, Intersection of Garden State Parkway and State Route 37, Toms River, Ocean County, New Jersey.

Significance: Toms River, first established in the early eighteenth century, was a prosperous commercial town and seat of Ocean County. Cranberry Inlet (closed by a storm in the nineteenth century) provided Toms River with a direct route to the Atlantic Ocean, enabling the early development of lumber and saltworks establishments. In the early nineteenth century, charcoal production also became prominent.

History: Toms River, known as Goose Creek before 1727, first appeared in the records of the New Jersey Proprietors in 1740.¹ Most attribute the origin of the name to the first white settler, Thomas Luker, who established a ferry across the river around 1702. Stories of Indian Tom and his wigwam at the mouth of the river remain popular, though most historians are more convinced by an account of the English surveyor William Toms who passed through the area late in the seventeenth century. The 1740 records include a description of the legendary Cranberry Inlet, which once provided Toms River with a direct route to the Atlantic, enabling the early development of an extensive lumber industry and the establishment of several prominent saltworks. The inlet also provided opportunities for local privateers to seize British cargo ships entering the bay. By 1782, the Pennsylvania Salt Works at Shelter Cove and the two other saltworks in the vicinity were considered valuable enough to require a blockhouse and militia for protection against British attack. Captain Joshua Huddy, in charge of defending the blockhouse, was forced to surrender in the battle on March 24, 1782. Hanged in retaliation for the death of a Loyalist, Huddy became a local hero. Today the diamond-shaped piece of land between Route 9 and Water Street is known as Huddy Park.

Early urban development of Toms River began along the stage line running from Freehold to Tuckerton along Old Freehold Road, laid out in 1767. The Ocean House, a three-story white clapboard hotel, served as a local meeting hall and housed the first Ocean County Freeholder Board in 1850. The west wing of the old hotel is now part of Citta's Old Time Tavern, a restaurant on Route 9. Gordon's Gazetteer reported that in 1834 Toms River was "a flourishing village of fifty to sixty frame dwellings, some of which are very neat and commodious, two taverns, five or six stores and a Methodist meeting." As he implied, this prosperity was directly related to the "more than \$200,000 worth of timber and cord-wood annually exported."²

Charcoal production also became important to the town's economy, particularly in the 1830s when the Dover forge increased production. Founded in 1789, eight or nine

¹ William Fischer, Biographical Cyclopaedia of Ocean County (Philadelphia: A.D. Smith and Co., 1899), 92.

² Thomas Gordon, Gazetteer of the State of New Jersey, 1834 (Louisiana: Polyanthos, Inc., 1973), 250.

miles from Toms River landing, the forge included a sawmill and fourteen or fifteen houses for workmen, a two-story frame house for the manager, and several other buildings by 1793. When William Torrey purchased the property and changed the name to Manchester, wood rails were built from the forge to the Horton Coal Docks at Toms River. Despite improved transportation routes, both the iron and lumber industries began to falter in the 1840s as the forests and their resources were gradually depleted.³

In 1850, Toms River became the seat of newly formed Ocean County, previously part of Monmouth. A Greek Revival courthouse, the center of today's county government complex, was constructed on Washington Street. Behind the courthouse was a Federal/Greek Revival sheriff's house and ten attached jail cells.⁴ A new Methodist church "with colonnade front, a steeple and a recess pulpit" replaced the old 1828 meeting house on its historic cemetery site.⁵ This burst of urban planning inspired the construction of a large number of residences in the vicinity of Main Street. Between 1840 and the early 1900s many two-story wood-frame vernacular Queen Anne homes, such as the 1904 William Giberson House lined the central thoroughfare. Though predominately of the Giberson type, a range of popular Victorian styles were also illustrated, from vernacular Second Empire of the 1886 Rogers Singleton House to the Colonial Revival 1898 Mathis house. Two Italianate villas, the 1860 James Gowdy House and the residence of Joseph Francis, both pictured in Woolman's Atlas, stood on prominent sites along the river.⁶ The Woolman drawings, with a horsedrawn carriage and stately sailboats in the foreground and carefully manicured lawns and shrubs surrounding the buildings, depict the home life of successful Toms River businessmen in the 1870s.

On July 3, 1866, the Central Railroad's first train reached Toms River. Fourteen years later, the Pennsylvania Railroad brought more visitors, contributing to the development of the area as a resort. The 1867 Toms River Yacht Club, the second-oldest continually operating club of its type in America, catered to this new and growing cliental. The Dover House, a small riverside hotel that housed the club from 1902-14, is now occupied by a law firm. Kobbe's contemporary visitor's guide focused on the abundance of river-related leisure activities in the area.

This river is broad and deep from shore to shore, thus affording excellent facilities for boating. The yachting fleet numbers about 150 sail, and during the summer there are two yacht races. In this river, as in all streams which

³ Boyer, 254-56.

⁴ The Ocean County Courthouse Complex, 1850-1990 (Toms River: Ocean County Cultural and Heritage Commission, 1990), 1-5.

⁵ The Methodist Church of Toms River, 1953 Directory.

⁶ H.C. Woolman and T.F. Rose, Historical and Biographical Atlas of the New Jersey Coast (Philadelphia: Woolman and Rose, 1878; reprint, Toms River, N.J.: Ocean County Historical Society, 1985), 283-285.

empty into the bay, there is excellent fishing for perch, pickerel and eels, and there is good fresh water bathing.⁷

By the turn of the century, Toms River contained five churches of different denominations, a "graded" school, a national bank, a fire company, eight secret societies and an abundance of high-quality roads for cyclists.⁸ Poultry farmers began to take advantage of the cheap land along Route 9 and Old Freehold Road and, in the early 1920s, Toms River became a major contributor to the egg market. Poultry farming was an important industry until 1950, when a drop in egg prices caused many farmers to sell their land to developers.⁹ Today, the results of several idealistic "urban redevelopment projects" remain; the downtown shopping district has been abandoned in favor of outlying shopping centers and malls. While the red-brick municipal buildings, county library and town hall assembled on Washington Street achieve a certain amount of architectural unity, this civic center stands apart from the commercial and residential sections of the community.

Prepared by: Sarah Allaback
HABS Historian
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⁷ Gustav Kobbe, The New Jersey Coast and Pines (Baltimore: Gateway Press, 1977), 68.

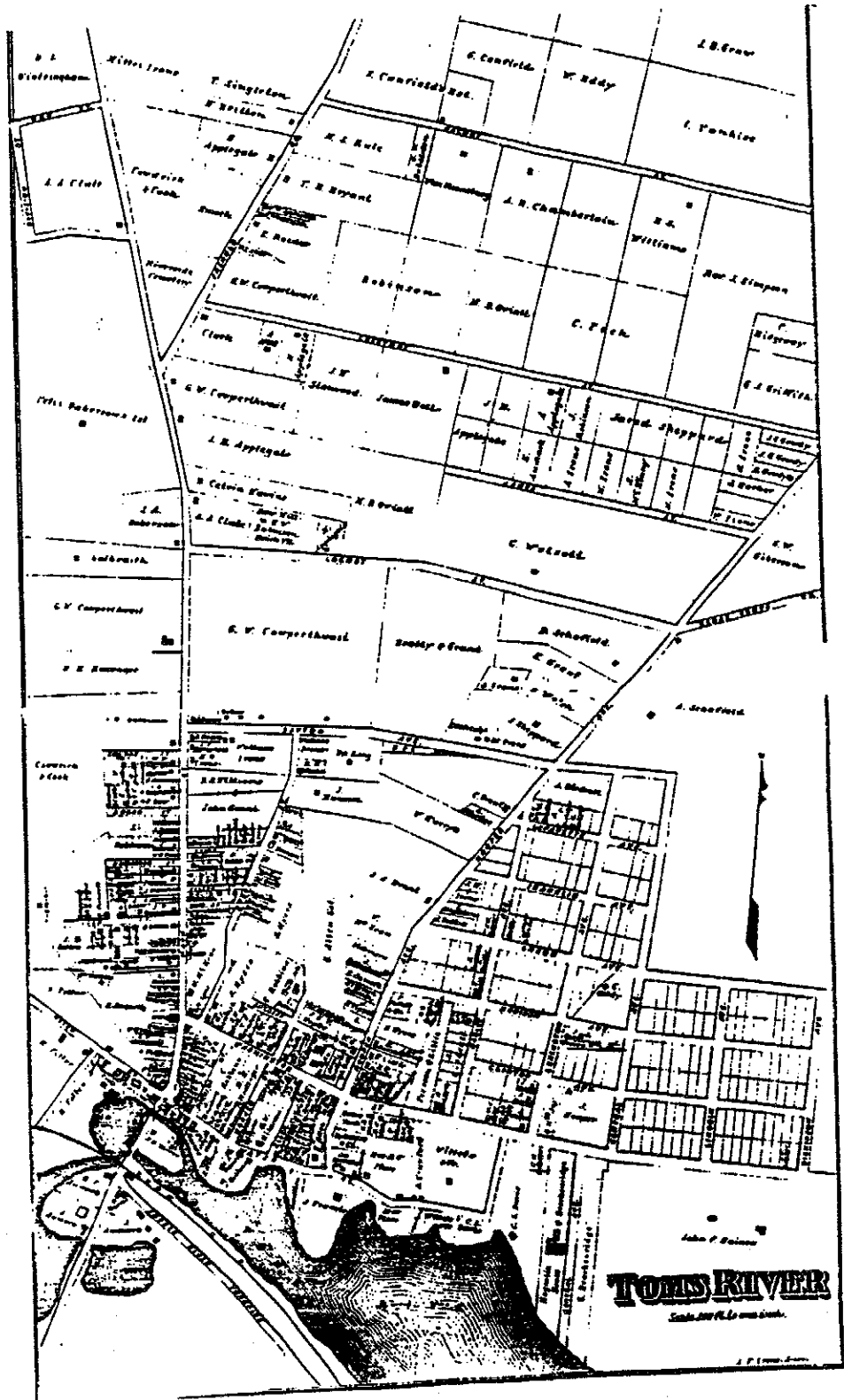
⁸ Fischer, 91.

⁹ "Ocean County Historic Sites Survey" (Toms River: Ocean County Cultural and Heritage Commission, 1981), 7.

Woolman, H.C. and T.F. Rose. Historical and Biographical Atlas of the New Jersey Coast. Philadelphia: Woolman and Rose, 1878; reprint, Toms River, N.J.: Ocean County Historical Society, 1985.

Project Information:

This project was sponsored by the New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trail (NJCHT) of the National Park Service, Janet Wolf, director. The documentation was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS), Robert Kapsch, chief, under the direction of HABS historian Sara Amy Leach, project supervisor. Three historians completed the research during summer 1991: Field supervisor Sarah Allaback (Massachusetts Institute of Technology), Alfred Holden (University of Vermont), and Camille Gatz (North Carolina). David Ames (University of Delaware) made the large-format photographs. Historian, Elizabeth Harris May (George Washington University), edited the HABS reports.



H.C. Woolman and T.F. Rose, Historical and Biographical Atlas of the New Jersey Coast (Philadelphia: Woolman and Rose, 1878; reprint, Toms River, N.J.: Ocean County Historical Society, 1985), 280-1.